FAMILY VIOLENCE - IS IT A WOMAN'S PROBLEM?

Address by

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This is not an easy topic for any of us who have been involved in the women's movement. It is the kind of subject that keeps you awake at night and that fills you with rage, and seems particularly ludicrous somehow to be discussing while most of you are in the middle of your chocolate sauce, or whatever it is. It is hard to think about. It's hard to come to grips with, and the people that have helped me in my thinking about this subject have been women. I want to acknowledge them right now. I'm thinking particularly of Dr. Dorothy Smith at the University of British Columbia and the work that she's been doing; and Gillian Walker who is probably here and probably taking part in this conference; and some of the other women and the many conversations that we've had about this.

It is not for me, as it is for Dr. Straus, an interesting subject. It's a horrifying subject. I have another disagreement with Dr. Straus that I would like to mention. He feels the social sciences has revealed to us the aspects of the world that are a daily and criticial part of our lives. That is not my opinion. In fact, it is one of my frustrations that the things that I have read in the social sciences are of little use to me in understanding and in dealing with the kinds of women and the kinds of situations that came to me on the other end of the phone when I was working in the Ombuds Service of the Vancouver Status of Women. Nothing that has been done by the social sciences categorically has helped me to understand the nature of the situation that goes beyond the particular relationship of the man and woman that are calling, and that somehow qualifies me to understand and to fit that experience into an overall picture so that I can understand the situation that women are in - those women that call me. It is now occurring to other women that social science as it is practised doesn't apply to us at all.

By now I think it's axiomatic - a cliche - for those of us who work in the women's movement, that we realize that women are excluded totally from the means of material production and the ownership of that means of production. So we are beginning to realize we are excluded from the production of the concepts which govern our lives. We are silenced. We do not form the thoughts. We do not produce the concepts that govern how it is we see the world. Our experience is never adequately described by the disciplines in the social sciences. We always end up the objects of the study. We are told, here are some

people that we will look at from this particular position, and the position from which we are being looked at as women is one that we do not occupy. It's not to say that women aren't doing this, aren't looking at us as well, but I think we have to be very clear that the women who are also looking have been trained in the tools and the concepts that have been generated by and that form the practices and methods of dealing with the world by professionals, by managers, in terms of their concerns and in terms of what they think is important - and these people are not women. And so what they tell us about our situation often is not the least bit how it appears to us at all. So that when I look at the literature, Dr. Straus' included, and some of the other things you will be reading and have read, I find that the whole situation is masked somehow. It is removed. It is abstracted. Somehow it does not apply to anything that I experience or that the women who I talk to tell me. So that we look, when we read about marital violence, at things like violence in general. Where does it come from? Is it biologic? Is it psycho-analytic? What is violence? Is violence legitimate? Is it instrumental or expressive? How many bruises make a battered wife? Is it a punishment? A whole range of thinking goes on that is abstracted - totally divorced - from any sort of thing that the battered wife in fact actually experiences. Probably the most horrendous example is in the line I read in the quote from the United Way Report on Wife Battering, and I can only hope that it was ironic. It was talking about alcoholism and wife battering and it said "what the drunken husband may in fact suffer from is an inability to judge the degree of battering that a wife can take without dying."

These are the kinds of definitions that I suggest are absolutely useless to what we have to deal with today. We have to decide, according to some of the social sciences, what amount of violence is socially approved, and I would suggest that it is never socially approved by the victim. So that how the whole subject is talked about serves to disguise and modify and derail what it is that we're looking at when we talk about violence between family members, when we talk about the roots of violence in biologic and psycho-analytic terms. There has been no mention in the literature that I have read about the particular continuum of violence against women, starting with such things as rape, wife battering, and culminating in the sorts

of things we hear now are going on in New York where people are paying $200.oo - men are paying $200.00 - to watch what are called snuff movies where women - these movies are made in South America - have been kidnapped and are raped and killed for the benefit of the cameras. These are the sorts of things that are not elucidated for us by the social sciences.

We also, when we read about marital violence, we can't tell who is doing what. The language is completely neutral. It is completely de-sexed. De-sexing of the language is something that the women's movement strives for. We find that it is very very awkward to do in other places. However when one is talking about marital violence it is done across the board. So we read such things as 'Violence between family members', something called 'intra-family murder', 'aggravated assault between husband and wife', and so on. 'Couples using physical force', 'cases where knives and guns were used against each other', 'two million people beaten up by their spouses'. What happens when we do this is we somehow begin to see or begin to think or are looking at it as if, in fact, violence was being dispersed equally among the adults in the family. I think we must be very very clear that this is not the case, that when we are talking about marital violence we are by and large talking about violence against women. I did a lot of research in a police station. I never heard a call come in from a husband who was being beaten, and when Straus talks about the cultural norms and legitimizing the use of violence between family members, he is talking, and again we must be very clear about this, he is talking about the legitimate use of violence against women.

Another thing that I think escapes us in the kinds of social sciences being done today is that we do not give enough serious consideration to a social order that places women in a situation where violence is routinely done to them, and keeps them there. And this is the family. We see the family as a unit, as the basic unit of our society, and we look at the family as a democracy where what goes on between the adults presumably goes on equally. We are then blinded to the fact that within the family the adults have very different status indeed. One has the money and also the social authority in the public world. And we do not see the family when we look at it this way, in its economic context.

We must realize that in our particular economic system all of the people are not needed. It is essential for our economic system that there be a huge range of unemployment. There are not jobs for everybody and our whole thing is based on production. If you're not producing, you're not needed. It is essential then that we have a mechanism whereby we can make one salary do for a number of people, and this is what the family serves in this particular context. And further, we go on to say that the earner of that salary has significantly more value in the eyes of society and in the rights within the home. So we do not seriously address the fact that women experience marriage quite differently than men do, and that for many women, marriage is a tyranny and it is a trap, and that women within it are powerless and subordinate and confined. And I am not saying that this is built into the relationship between the sexes. I'm saying that this is a setup in our society. This is the product of our particular economic needs where people who are not producing have to have a place where they can go and be stuck into cold storage until such time as they are again needed, for instance, during war or other national crises; and then, of course, there are jobs for women and they can come out of the home. Meanwhile, they are there.

It is very, very difficult for women to get out of this situation when there isn't such a national crisis, when there is a time of recession such as we are seeing now. We are taught to be dependent. We are raised, it seems to me, to be defective, to be fearful, to be unaggressive. We are educated to be incompetent and to find it very, very difficult unless we are fortunate, as I am fortunate, to have a university education and still make half of what my colleague would make. We are taught to be incompetent such that we cannot support ourselves and our children. We lose, I think, by the time we reach our late teens any reasonable chance of planning our own future. We are afraid to live alone, and I am not talking here about pathology. I am not talking about an abnormal situation. I am talking about a situation in which wife-beating occurs which is normal. It is a part of our social system. It is shored up. It is enforced by the state and by the professions.

And if a woman wants to leave this state no one will help her. The police won't help. Welfare won't help. Psychiatrists, doctors, social workers, ministers of the church, our social agencies--they

will not help her. Family court, which is the last bastion to me, particularly, will not help her. So that we have a situation if a woman wants to leave she can't get social assistance as long as she shares the address of her husband, and I've had people in the Department of Human Resources say to me "if she really wanted to she would find a landlord who would let her move in without paying any money and then we'll give her some money." This is in Williams Lake. All I can say is there must be very, very different landlords in Williams Lake.

We have psychiatrists who seem to be obsessed with blaming the victim. Women, we read, that are beaten are too aggressive or they're too passive or they're too passive-agressive or they're too masochistic or they're too assertive or they're too well-educated or all sorts of other things which somehow justify the situation that they are in and justify the label that we have now developed to put on them called battered wives.

The husband, on the other hand, is treated as somehow pathological as well but I think the tone is a little bit different. He is under too much stress. He is worried about sex. He's unemployed. For a number of other reasons his behavior is somehow excused by whatever it is that we undergo in urban living. We have the situation which I heard of just the other day in Toronto where when women come to the Interval House in Toronto with their children for shelter the husbands beat on the door as they do here, followed by the minister of the church who is wanting to persuade the wives to go home.

In the United Community Services Report I was struck by the fact that most of the agencies in this town hardly even know how many wives are being battered. This is not a part of the things that they consider serious or the kinds of problems that they are equipped to deal with. Women come who have been battered and they ask for counselling because that is what the agency is set up to do, and the counselling I suggest is to keep them back in the home.

Family court--I don't even know where to start. We had, some of you may know, a bit of a rally on International Women's Day, and an official in the justice system who I won't name said that he hoped very much that part of our demonstration on International Women's Day would be to burn the place down, and I have to concur.

It seems to me that the whole philosophy of family court is not geared to the kinds of problems that we're talking about. One lawyer who is now a judge in family court expressed a written opinion that wife beating was not a crime against the community as beating of one's neighbour is, and therefore, needn't be heard in criminal court but should properly then be heard in family court, and the justification for this is that this is where there is an informal setting where people can discuss freely without being bound by strict rules of evidence, where people's stories can be heard, where things can be mediated. What happens, in fact, is that little deals are made, little agreements are reached before the case even goes to court, and that women face the judge with things already decided, and the decision is usually that if the man is found guilty he's given a suspended sentence or he signs some paper that says he will not do it again, and the two of them are sent home. There was a particularly brutal incidence of this just last month. An immigrant woman by the name of Jamila Dean with a record of violence against her that extends back to the length of her marriage and from the information I have, certainly, within the year that she's been in Vancouver, including intervention by VGH and Human Resources, finally went to court, charged her husband with criminal assault (it was agreed that this would be held as I say in family court rather than in criminal court), was persuaded the day before the court to agree to return home with him if he signed such a paper that he would not hit her anymore. I understand from the people who told me that she did this, that he was given a suspended sentence, that she went home, and four days later, she was dead; and her husband has been charged with the murder. I heard of a similar instance the other day in Surrey where the woman in question had a similar settlement in this court, where everybody's story is supposed to be heard, went home and killed herself.

I think we have to be very clear that this is violence that the state, that the government, that the agencies are doing absolutely nothing to control, and furthermore, it is the only kind of violence that the state and the government are doing nothing to control. Only, in my opinion, have the women's agencies helped. The Vancouver Status of Women, we are told, Transition House, we are told are the places where women call and where women

go when they are being beaten, and these are the places that scramble for government money and that are continually in danger of being cut off. I think that we have to look at this as a policy and see that it is endemic and that it is enforced and that it comes from the highest possible authorities and it is continued, and that everybody who works within these systems ensures that it continues.

On January 11, Vander Zalm, the Minister of Human Resources, stated to the province that he was very alarmed that public money was being spent helping people get divorced. He said "we are trying to keep the family together. The maintenance"this is a quote, "the maintenance of these split families is our biggest concern." Now we have to look at what he is saying here. One thing about it,he is not being hypocritical. He is saying right out he is not concenred about the moral fabric of the community or the sacredness of the hearth or anything like that. He's saying "we do not want to give these women and their children any money. We want to make it as hard as possible for them to leave". He is trying to make sure that he unloads the wife and her children onto some person whose salary will have to cover them both. It occurs to me that he does not care how it is that woman must exist within the family, what it is she must put up with, the kinds of things that she must endure. This is simply of no interest to him. It is clear to me that something is being enforced here, and what that something is is the authority of the husband, so that my statement, my belief, is that every agency in this city, and I'll exempt only those who are working actively in the women's movement, shore up this particular authority and do not help the wife.

If a woman tries to leave she can't support herself and the kids anyway, in most cases. We do not have the training that enables us to do this. And she won't be able to find a place to live, and nobody will help her find a place to live. Again, I have to refer to the kinds of comments that I've heard from landlords in this city who will not rent to a woman and her children for all kinds of reasons. They consider them immoral. They probably won't be able to pay. They won't be able to fix the stove. I don't care what it is - it doesn't matter. The

landlords in this city will not rent, if they can get away with it, to women with children.

She will receive no help with her children in terms of day care that will allow her to go out and look for a job or anything else. As a matter of fact, and this is really a compelling thing for a lot of women, she stands to lose her children in these kinds of situations, if the violence is reported. Now again, some of the articles that I have read that are talking about possible solutions begin to slide away from the situation of the woman when they start discussing this, and they start to worry about the situation of the children so that we get such recommendations as "we must watch very carefully the children that are in a violent situation". I was really alarmed to see a recommendation from the United Way that says if children are in Transition House they will hear men spoken of in derogatory ways. They will be in a female atmosphere. This is of grave concern. My answer to that is first of all, who are we trying to kid? I mean these children have, presumably, just seen such violence done upon their mothers. They will have plenty of chance, in my opinion, to learn to view men with respect. It is respect for the women that is needed. And I think with these kinds of recommendations and these kinds of things being said women who are in these situations will become increasingly concerned that if they try to do anything and if they go anywhere and if they tell anybody, they will lose their children. So I have no problem at all in understanding why it is that women stay in these circumstances, because where will she go and what will she do?

I think today is an historic conference. I believe there's one going on in Toronto at exactly the same time. It's never happened before. I don't hesitate to say that I believe it is the women's movement that has begun to bring these things to the point where we're here today discussing them. I want to say that a lot of hope rests on what's going to happen in the next few days and the recommendations that come out of it.

It would be a derailment to focus on the causes of violence. It's an academic exercise that could go to the end of the year. I think if we focus, in the conference, on trying to explain behaviour in terms of pathology - this will be a failure. Why

should we offer therapy to men who have no reason to think that they need it, and this has been documented in the kinds of studies that have been done. They don't come when they're offered therapy. Why should they? In their opinion and the opinion of many, many people they've done nothing wrong. Why should we offer therapy to women who simply don't want to be hit anymore? I think, also, if we persist in this conference in the notion that the best family, and the proper family, and the only acceptable family, and the family that we all must strive to achieve is that family that has two adults - male and female - and 3.5 children, and that this is the only proper family, and that this is the family that must be tinkered with and patched and repaired and forced to stick together at all costs, and I mean at all costs to those that are in it and none to the state, I think this will be a failure.

I think we have two issues to talk about in the next few days. Men beat their wives because they are permitted to do so and nobody stops them, and women are beaten because they are trained and forced and maintained into dependence and nobody helps them, and those are the issues to deal with.